

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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John E. Baldacci

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College, the date is February 24, 2010, and I'm in the governor's office in Augusta. This is Andrea L'Hommedieu, and today I'm interviewing Governor John Baldacci. Governor Baldacci, I just want to refer people to the Muskie interview you did a few years ago that gives some of the background on you and your roots in politics in Maine, but I don't want to repeat that today, considerate of your time. And start with talking about, what we didn't talk about then, is some of the family background and the history of your family. And I think a lot of people are curious what the connection is with the Mitchell family, and you correct me where I'm wrong, I believe that your grandmother was a sister to George Mitchell's mother. Can you talk about that family connection, and which side of the family that grandmother was on?

John Baldacci: Sure, sure, thank you very much, Andrea. The connections are that my grandmother on my mother's side was actually, first of all, let me see if I put this together, I guess the family trees are difficult sometimes, but my grandmother and George's mother were sisters, Mintaha, George's mother, and my grandmother, Rose, were sisters. But my real grandmother, who gave birth to my mother, was George Mitchell's other aunt, and what happened was that she died during childbirth, in delivering my mother, and my mother was born in Waterville down on Front Street, in Head of Falls, they all kind of lived in the little area which always was sort of like a mini Lebanese community, because the Maronite church was there, which they worshiped at.

So my real grandmother died in delivering my mother, from birth, and my second grandmother adopted my mother and she was in Bangor, so my mother was brought to Bangor and she was raised by my grandmother and grandfather second time around. And they were like grandparents to us, and my mother always treated my grandmother and grandfather as her father and mother and [they] were very important to my mother. But the roots are that Mintaha had [three] sisters, there were four sisters, Tamam, Rose, Mintaha, and my first grandmother [Mary]. So that's how we ended up in Bangor, and my mother [Rosemary (Karam) Baldacci] was up in Bangor and not in Waterville.

We would go to Waterville almost every weekend, and the people in Waterville would come up to Bangor, so there was a regular going back and forth all the time to Waterville. So we'd always visit all the relatives, and when we got to Mintaha's house, of course at that time when I was a kid, George was in either college, had graduated from college, or he was doing work for Muskie or somehow involved in the staff there in politics. But we just got to regularly visit with

them like once a week, and always had to stop on Front Street, because the Boles are my relatives also, the Boles and the Nales and the Mitchells.

And what I'm so proudest about overall of all of them, I know I'm jumping ahead, is that they really came from very humble beginnings. John Mitchell, Paul Mitchell, Bob Mitchell, and George Mitchell, I mean all each accomplished in their own way, and Mintaha the mother was a strong leader in terms of raising the boys, because George, the father, had passed away earlier. But she really did, she ruled the roost, made sure they got the attention and education they needed and reinforced that, and they've all, from very humble origins, really developed. Bob in the banking community, John certainly in coaching and physical education, everybody that has ever accomplished anything in sports they either owe it to John or John feels they owe it to him, and he's been a real, they refer to him as Swisher, from his basketball days. Then Paul, and Paul God bless him, just had a heart operation, and I have him on the board of trustees and am re-nominating him, and I know that he is probably working more now than he was when he was in his insurance business, I mean he's an inspiration to everybody.

AL: Right, and that's the University of Maine board.

JB: University of Maine Board of Trustees, and he's just been a wonderful addition. And then of course George, and I'm proud of all of them, as my mother would always say about all of the children, and George, remembering him as always being very kind of bookish, always reading, always writing, not talking very much. He wasn't the kind of a politician when I began to know him and watched him. He was a worker, he was somebody who would develop the papers and the research and the positions and do all of that kind of work that was difficult and hard, but he enjoyed it and it came easy to him, and Senator Muskie ended up relying on George quite a bit and they became the closest of friends.

George always had a great mind; he was always very, very bright, and always enjoyed listening to him. And he wasn't a politician at first, he wasn't the back-slapper kind of a politician working the rubber chicken circuit, so to speak. People mistook that for being aloof, but it was just not George's style. But when George Mitchell spoke, people listened to him because what he had to say, it meant something. And he has continued that tradition in his service, and I think that's why he has done as well as he's done, is because he has substance. He isn't sort of a thirty-second sound bite; he isn't an inch deep and a mile wide. There's a lot of substance to George Mitchell, there's a lot there, he has a lot to offer, and when he takes an issue or a problem, he always puts in such context, both in terms of historical context, and in terms of policy, and it leads you to a natural result of what the action should be, and what it shouldn't be. And we don't have that enough in politics.

I remember George growing up, and just how smart he was, and once people got an opportunity, because he lost his first election, he won the nomination but he lost the election for governor, but all it was, was that people did not have an opportunity for a personal interaction with George. And I think once they did, and once he personally engaged with them, it just became a love fest from beginning to end when he was appointed United States senator and finished out Senator

Muskie's term, when [Muskie] became secretary of state nominated by Jimmy Carter. Senator Mitchell became a senator, and he wanted to, even though he was a lifetime appointment as a federal judge, because the impact that he could make he felt was greater as a United States senator than as a federal judge. As much of an honor as that was, he could make a bigger impact, and it was worth the risk of trading in a lifetime appointment, for at that time what was for two years, and a very questionable reelection battle, because he had been estimated to be thirty or thirty-five points behind the Republican nominee at that time, David Emery.

So it was really a gamble on his part, but I think he learned so much from his first campaign for governor, and he had an opportunity to be in front of a lot of people at bean suppers and coffees and things like that, that they really began to really like George. And the fact is, he has so much substance to offer. I think people in Maine respond to that, regardless of your background and your bank account, people in Maine respond to the person. What do they stand for? What values do they represent? And, why is it that they want to serve in the United States Senate? People treat people, regardless of background and wealth, to an equal status, that we're all in the same field and we're all on the same level. So I was always very impressed.

AL: Were you surprised that the person appointing George Mitchell to the Senate was Governor Brennan, who had run a pretty tough primary campaign and lost in '74?

JB: I was a friend of Governor Brennan and I supported Governor Brennan, and I remember going to Governor Brennan and his people, recommending George Mitchell. And they'd always say, "Well, he's your cousin." And I'd say, no, because I think his appointment helped Governor Brennan. Governor Brennan was running for reelection at that time, and I think the pressure was always about picking the best person or picking somebody who was a good friend and would be more of a political payoff type of thing. And you've got to give Governor Brennan a lot of credit, because he chose a person that would shine brightly for Maine, and I think that that recognizes that. So I think yes, the differences of opinion and races that each other has fought for or against each other, they recognized that working together they had a tremendous value.

And I remember campaigning in that campaign, when George was running for reelection and Joe was running for reelection, and I remember what a powerful, dynamic ticket that was. That was a huge year in 1982, when George and Joe were on the ticket together. That was the strongest ticket that we had as Democrats, and I think that's when we overtook the Republicans in the state senate, and we had two thirds in the state senate Democrats, and two thirds in the house, and with a Democratic governor, Brennan. We had never won as many seats and had developed such super majorities, and I know we owe all of that to the leadership on our ticket of Governor Brennan and George Mitchell, because we just had a powerful one-two punch. So it didn't surprise me that he did that, because Governor Brennan always is looking down the road and making decisions not for the moment, but that will have an impact in the future. And I think they made a great team and they've worked together since.

AL: Can we go back a little bit to your Lebanese background. I'm interested in sort of, growing up, if your family was able to maintain some Lebanese traditions in the home?

JB: Oh God, yes.

AL: Can you talk about that, that's a big part of getting a sense of who you are.

JB: My mother would be very proud of you, because she'd always remind me, she'd say, you're not just Italian, you're also Lebanese. She was very proud of her Lebanese heritage, and philosophers, Kahlil Gibran, and the Lebanese diet, frankly, the bulgur wheat (?), the tabbouleh, the laban. I was lucky, I grew up in an Italian-Lebanese household, where my grandparents on both sides made Italian food from scratch, made Lebanese food from scratch. On the Lebanese side, I would actually go out and pick the grape leaves in the backyard for my grandmother, and she would make the rolled grape leaves, which we referred to as cigars, you know, rolled cigars, but she would make that, and I'd help her grind the lamb, because she'd be grinding the lamb to mix in with the rice, and I enjoyed working with her.

And then I always remember when she made laban, it was something that I refer to audiences today, because we don't have enough generation transferring to another generation of cultures and values and tradition, but when you make laban, you have to have always used the previous batch of laban to make a new batch, and I've always said that continuity expresses how we should treat our grandparents, our parents, is that they're important valuable mentors to the children and grandchildren, and it's important that they instill the values, roots and traditions of our heritage. Yes, we are Americans, we're proud to be Americans, but we also have a Lebanese heritage and roots that we also can be very proud about. And I think that's what my grandmother used to say, "Don't shake the room with the laban in it, we're letting it set and work its magic." And she'd always say, "It's important for us to have that batch so we can make a new batch," and I was always impressed by that.

And I love Lebanese cooking, and my cousin Ann Mitchell makes this, I mean it's interesting how this generation is going back to the Lebanese cooking, because it's healthy, good for you, and they make it very regularly, so Ann is, she's great at it, and my brother Bob's wife Beth is learning how to cook Lebanese food. My wife enjoys doing some of the Lebanese dishes too, so it's an important part of our heritage, and would be a part of our food and meals. I always used to say to people, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday would be tabbouleh, bulgur wheat (?), grape leaf zatra, and then the other days, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday would be spaghetti and meatballs, and maybe pasta or some chicken parmesans. We didn't eat American food until McDonald's opened up.

AL: And were you old enough to observe the relationship between your grandmother and your great aunt?

JB: Yes, there was no question they were very, very close, they were very close. And they were very good businesspeople, Lebanese women are very good businesspeople. My grandmother had apartments and she had a grocery store, and she managed that along with her grandchildren. And so was Mintaha, Mintaha was very smart. They're very smart, good

businesspeople, and they would get together all the time and talk and visit with each other. And I would go to her house, while my grandmother and great aunt would be talking, and I'd see the uniform of George Mitchell's father, because he served in the military, and I'd see different historical things that they had in the house, while they were both talking. And the Lebanese roots and its history were very important.

My grandmother and I, we'd go from Bangor, and my grandmother was like a secretary of state, we'd leave Bangor and we'd go to Waterville and we would visit all the relatives. Even if the relatives had a disagreement with each other and they weren't talking right at that particular point, my grandmother would visit with all of them, she had a relationship with all of them, so I used to refer to her as the secretary of state, kind of like Paul Mitchell today. Paul makes it a mission to visit with each of the children and grandchildren and families, and he really has been very good about that, and it's important that that continues.

AL: Yeah, that's easy to overlook.

JB: But it is important, because unfortunately you meet people, at hopefully the best of times, at weddings and things like that, or at the worst of times at funerals. But Paul's been really good about making sure that there's a family reunion, that families get together once a year type of thing, and he's been very good about that, and the whole family has been.

AL: So talk to me about what role you've played over the years in Senator Mitchell's campaigns. You said you were involved, did you have an official role?

JB: I think when you're family, related or whatever, you do your part, you do whatever's asked, and you stay out of the way. I appreciate that in my own campaigns with my own brothers and sisters, they're very helpful, integral to the whole thing, but there's no formal position. I mean they'll do a coffee in a house, they'll hand out fliers and bumper stickers and things like that.

What I've appreciated about George is that, in his campaigns – well, let me just tell you. I mean George is very smart, he's got very good people around him, the best people. Don Nicoll, who was with Senator Muskie was with George, and then when I went into Congress in '94, I mean George was the first phone call I made: what do you do now? And Larry Benoit, his state director, was my chief of staff, and we pulled in a lot of Mitchell people. And Joy, I think you were one of the first schedulers that I had, or not schedulers -

Joy Leach: I was on the front desk.

JB: You were on the front desk.

JL: But yes, I worked for a policy committee for Senator Mitchell.

JB: Yes, and she had worked with Senator Mitchell, so we, with Larry and with, because

George's people, I mean Janet Dennis, and Biddeford, Judy Cadorette, God bless her, Judy, Judy, Janet, and Mary LeBlanc, and Ashley Martinage, I mean I was very lucky because I got the cream of the crop. George was the first called, Larry was the first hire, and from there Larry put together a team in the district offices that was the best district offices I ever had for constituent services, and they got the best services, and they had been part of Senator Mitchell's office. And we worked very closely with Senator Mitchell and with Larry in a team, so I was very lucky to be able to have that as an advantage, even though as a freshman member of Congress in 1994 and Newt Gingrich's being the speaker, and it was difficult for Democrats, let alone freshman Democrats. I was really at a higher level because of the people I was able to get just around me from Senator Mitchell's influences. And no, I couldn't have done it without him.

And it's something we don't talk about too much, I mean because George is my relative, and his mother and family, very close over the years, but we kind of, we stand on our own. And God bless George, he would try to help me out, remind people you know, "Yes, we're both related. I may not agree with everything that he does, but he's doing it because he believes it's the right thing to do," and George would often say that. But no, I couldn't have done it without his help and support.

AL: Do you have any stories that you recall, regarding George or campaigning, or anything poignant or funny?

JB: We always used to have fun when we were campaigning, because George would always say it wasn't important to vote for him, as much as it was important to vote for me, or who was running for the state Senate or who's running for the House, because George always believed that the politics starts from the ground up, and if you help them out, it will help him out. That was the way George always approached it.

We were doing this one stop over at Hilda's, who is my Aunt, Hilda Cook in Bangor, did a fund raiser, a coffee, a tea over there. And it was funny because Hilda's related to us, George is related to us, I'm related to us, I mean we're all kind of related to each other. And he's going through this and I said, "It's kind of hard, George, because we're all related, so if you help one out, you're helping all of them out," and he started laughing, but that was a fun campaign, that was a fun campaign. I remember we stopped at the Blaine House, after a heavy campaign event in the summertime, for refreshments, and just seeing him and Governor Brennan and all of the people running for office just relaxing and having a good time was a good memory that I won't forget, and that was back in 1982, during that campaign.

That was a great year, and George went on to become the Senate majority leader, which was just a tremendous accomplishment, but he's got so much substance that it just has to come through, especially when you're dealing with people who use TV advertising firms to get elected, and George did it on his own ability.

AL: And so do you still find opportunities these days to be in touch, or is it much more difficult?

JB: Well, unfortunately when we get in touch with each other it's usually because there's a very pressing issue. And George, as you know, is working on the Middle East, and I have been in touch with him. My brother Bob stays in closer contact with George, just touching base with him, but we do trade phone calls back and forth on particular issues. George still has the Mitchell Scholars program, can't do anything because of the restrictions in his new job, but it's very important to him, and it's very important that that work get supported. So we talk, you know, we talk when we have to talk. He's been very good about taking the calls, and at the same time, when he wants to call me, I know that it's important, and so we go through that back and forth. But no, he's been a real gentleman; I mean he really has been. I know that his mother and my grandmother would be proud of him and Paul and John continuing to help out the children and grandchildren and the cousins, and seeing them all together, I think, would be very satisfying to them. And a lot of it is due to the work of the boys and their families.

AL: Did your grandmother ever talk about her early years in Lebanon? They were born in Lebanon, right?

JB: Right, they were born right outside of Beirut, Jezzine [Bkassine], and I think when the unrest was going on – my grandmother and my great aunt had gotten together and they'd actually gone over to Lebanon together, there was a trip that they had taken all together to go over to Lebanon, and we had films of that trip. They landed in Paris, and father [Amin] Saad was there. The relatives and relationships on my grandmother's side are very well recognized and very honorable, in terms of reputations, very, very impeccable reputations and whatnot in terms of how they do business, with the handshake, and the reputation that the family has, and I think if they go back enough, it's to the Saad family. And so she had gone with Tamam and Mintaha and my grandmother [Rosa], the three of them had gone over to Lebanon as part of a trip, and they had a great time.

But my Aunt Tamam had stayed back in Lebanon, and then there came the wars and battles, and then she had gone to the hills, she had lost all her property, taken away and what have you, and she had sort of escaped to the hills, the mountain regions. But no, that's the closest that I've gotten to that. George had a video done, or somebody did a video of the home town and the area for him, when he was in the Senate. I think Casey [Kamal Amin] Kasem, who was also Lebanese, had actually done the video, so that was one that George was very proud of and shared with the rest of the family.

AL: I think that's all the questions I had. Is there anything else that you feel is important to add?

JB: No, I think you pretty well got it. Now, George is how old?

AL: Seventy-six.

JB: Seventy-six, so George is twenty-one years older than I am, so we have a difference in

the age group in terms of his generation and my generation and growing up. No, I think you've got it. Most of the time with George that always impressed me was, he was always so quiet, reading and writing, he spent a lot of time reading, writing, and was very quiet. Always behind the scenes, always making sure that Senator Muskie was showing well, doing well. That's what I kind of think is the best thing I remember about George, amongst many others.

AL: Thank you very much.

End of Interview